

For the March 11, 2013 hearing

My name is Greta Blanchard and I am speaking in regard to bill HB6581. I have a letter I am going to read from a prisoner whose trial I was an alternate juror. I sat in the jury box during the entire trial until deliberation and then was let go because I was an alternate who wasn't needed. I asked one of the jurors to let me know, the results after they became public and when I got the phone call months later, I have to say I was shocked. He was one of five young men in a vehicle, two others of whom were convicted of murder. When Michael's trial came up he was convicted of 3 out of 4 counts - accessory to murder, weapon in a motor vehicle, and felony with a firearm. I called the county clerk's office when I discovered he'd not been sentenced yet. My husband and I went to the sentencing... totally surprised at his sentence time - 50 years. I decided then, that I would write to this young man to encourage him as best I could. I knew he wouldn't be able to pick me out of a crowd, but that wasn't the point. Surprisingly, he wrote back and we have been writing ever since.

I visited once when he was first brought to Cheshire Correctional Center and then was not allowed to visit anymore. He's been to Newtown and back and as of the last 6 months or so, my husband and I have been allowed to visit him again.

Michael Spyke was a teenager when he was arrested and put in jail. He had no financial support to help with lawyer fees and recently told us that his court appointed attorney said to him that he could plea bargain for 15 years if he wanted to, but that he had 15 minutes to decide. Michael was 16. He was comfortable with some aspects of the streets but naïve about the law. The other two who were actually convicted of the murder plea bargained and got 25 years.

Michael Spyke wrote this letter in September of 2012 when he'd been in prison for 14 ½ years, so now it's been 15. He has given me permission to use this letter to speak on his behalf. This tells his story better than I could ever explain.

Michael is in the Cheshire Correctional Institution. He is #264 373

Thank you very much for listening,

Greta Blanchard

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September, 2012

To Whom It May Concern,

Since the age of 16 I've been incarcerated, for 14 ½ years, almost half of my life. From the beginning, I was not put around juveniles my own age. I was placed around grown adult men, old enough to be my father or grandfather. A juvenile placed in a situation like that wasn't unusual back then. The prison authorities were both uninterested and unable to help me. It wasn't pretty.

So, when reality hit and I realized this is where I'm gonna be, I realized that no one could save me but myself. In order to do that I needed to find out who I am and what I wanted to be, what type of man I should be and what I could do to become the best of which I was capable of being. I also understood that what had happened to me had also happened to countless other black kids and it would happen to many more until a change occurred.

I read somewhere that it is easier to do bad than it is to do good. That's one of the truest statements I have ever read. My next statement I would never think I would say, but I think coming to jail saved my life in more ways than one. The potential I discovered I have, I don't think I would have ever discovered if I had been home. Now don't get me wrong, there hasn't been one night since I've been in here that I haven't prayed for Malik's mother to get through the loss of her child, even my mother to get through the loss of her child either. Because even though she could come visit, it still is not the same for her.

Coming in here at a young age was the hardest, most painful experience I ever have been through. But, I felt I was strong enough to get through it. I would never want to see any kid go through or see what I've seen behind these walls. I've learned that applying yourself and having the determination and patience is the key in accomplishing anything you want to do.

The first year incarcerated, I obtained my GED on the second try. The first try I failed by 4 points, the second try I passed by over 5 or 6 points. I studied real hard the second time, focused on my weak points and accomplished what I set out to do. Obtaining my GED was a big accomplishment in my eyes. Since back when I can remember from elementary through middle school, I didn't have to try hard to get passed through the next grade, because they always passed you by exception back then. I even remember failing the 7th grade and thinking, *wow, I messed up big, how am I gonna fix that.* But, it just so happened that when the first day of school came around, I was put back in class with my old classmates and was told if I could maintain a C- average I could graduate with my class. I don't even remember working hard that year. I was just happy to be around my old classmates and they still let me graduate – by exception.

The hardest I ever fought to apply myself to be somebody is when I came to be behind these walls. It's sad that I had to come into this type of environment to learn for myself that I had the potential to do something with my life. I've learned a lot and accomplished a lot in here. I've taken some vocational educational courses such as Bicycle/Wheelchair Repair, Commercial Cleaning, Time Life Management and a Business Education Class that consisted of 11 courses you needed to take in order to pass. The educational classes in the prisons are very limited and with long waiting lists. There have been other studies that I have been interested in that have not been available in here. I have ordered books from a bookstore and been self taught. Some of the books I've studied are mainly business books, dealing with import/export, real estate investing, and starting your own personal training business. The most recent book I'm studying is foreign currency trading.

Sometimes it gets frustrating because I'm dealing with a lot of negativity in here. So, it gets hard to stay focused and stay out of trouble. Then I ask myself sometimes, *what am I doing all this studying for when I will never be able to use it? I don't have parole and my discharge date is when I'm in my 60's.* But then I brush it off and put it in God's hands and have faith that something will give. I have been blessed with some new friends turned family that God has brought into my life, such as Larry, Greta and Mike. Plus, my mother, who stood by me through all of this when I knew it was harder for her than it has been for me being in here. I just hope I get the opportunity to show her that I'm so much better than this and give her something to be proud of.

Thank you just for reading this. One thing I will keep on doing is having faith and applying myself every day to be a better man.

Thank you for your time,

Michael Spyke